

ORAL MEMOIRS

OF

WALT FLEMING

An interview conducted on

May 12, 2020

Interviewer: Lydia Dillen

Angelo State University

West Texas Collection

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DILLEN: So, I'm Lydia Dillen and I am interviewing Walt Fleming over the phone. It is May 12th, 2020. Alright, let's go ahead and get started. Uh, when and where were you born?

FLEMING: Well I was born in Van Zandt County, Ben Wheeler, Texas. My dad was farming at the time. But we moved to New Mexico right away and I grew up in New Mexico and that's where I went into the service, uh...

CATHERINE FLEMING: May.

FLEMING: ...in May 1st, 1944. And I - I was only 15 years old...

DILLEN: Wow.

FLEMING: ...and, but I wasn't the youngest boy that went into the Navy. There was another one that was 12 years old from Montana and actually, there were between 200,000 and 400,000 underage Americans served in WWII. And that was a surprise to me when I come onto this information.

DILLEN: Right.

FLEMING: I entered the forces at - at New - in Clovis, New Mexico and I served in the Navy. And I was serving the Navy for a little over - a few days over two years. And my enlisted rank was Seaman First and I had that rank all through the war. And, uh, 'course I went in right at the end of the war. And, uh, I had a little trouble with the hour chart so I had to memorize the hour chart. And, like the other youngsters, I lied about my age and forged my parents' signatures...

DILLEN: Hmm.

FLEMING: ...to get in. Now that's really bad for a pastor to admit that he lied... [laughs]

DILLEN: [laughs]

FLEMING: ...to the Navy. But, um, then I went to Coronado. Well, I went to San Diego first and trained in boot camp and boot camp was - you ran everywhere. I got on a train in Clovis, New Mexico and had to stand up nearly all the way to San Diego. Then we got on a bus at 12 O'clock at night, rode three hours to get to the Navy base, and then after that three hours, we had to go to our physicals, take off our clothes and put 'em in a box to mail home, get our uniforms and our bedding and everything, go to our barracks, get our beds made and lay down in 'em for about 30 minutes before the reveille. Then we had to get up and run to breakfast - practically run through all the training for those nine weeks.

DILLEN: Mhmm.

FLEMING: Then, I was sent to Coronado Island [unclear] as a operator of a Higgins boat, it's a little plywood boat with a steel ramp that drops down where you can let troops off or take on wounded, which I did. Then, well, let me get back on - on - in the deal here. Uh, so I took part

in the invasion of Iwo Jima was my only under fire, um, time. But, I did, uh, take part also in Okinawa and I'll tell you about some of the rest later on.

DILLEN: Mhmm.

FLEMING: My motivation for enlisting is the same as all these young men. At that day in time we lived in a different age. It wasn't an age that there was a lot of people that waited 'till they were drafted but there were millions of us that joined because we felt a great honor to come to the service. In fact, we felt like we were being left out if we didn't get into the service.

DILLEN: Mhmm.

FLEMING: And, uh...

CATHERINE FLEMING: It was the Depression era.

FLEMING: ...it was in the Depression area. And, uh, though I was working 'cause so many of the men were gone, I'd been working at 14 for the State Highway Department building a rock crusher and running it.

DILLEN: Hmm.

FLEMING: And, uh, so, I was used to work. In fact, I'd worked all my life. All of us young people had work ethics because there was no playing around and there was no laws that said we couldn't work. And so we all worked in harvest and, and I lived in a town, Clovis, New Mexico, which... Portales, New Mexico which was called Gul - Goober Gulch, because the peanuts they plant there in the sandy soil. Peanuts and sweet potatoes and... all - they let schools out to work in the harvest.

DILLEN: Mhmm.

FLEMING: It was - it was just a different lifestyle than any we have today.

DILLEN: Right.

FLEMING: And I think it was a better. Did you say something?

DILLEN: Oh I was just saying "right."

FLEMING: Well, go ahead.

DILLEN: Um, so did you find your service challenging?

FLEMING: Yes, it was challenging at first. Through - through boot camp and through amphibious training. But the - we had some pretty high waves when we were landing and practicing but I loved every bit of it. I loved the boats, I never got sick on 'em. And as we

finished training there in - in, um, Coronado Island, they put us on a train that - that took some box cars and made - put some seats and benches in 'em for us to go to - up to Astoria, Oregon, where we were going to see our ship. It was a Kaiser hull that was being built while I was in training and it was ready to be decommissioned when I got there. And so I put the - helped put the ship in commission and then went out for a test run down the Coronado... uh, what river? Oh, Columbia.

CATHERINE FLEMING: Columbia River.

FLEMING: Columbia River, I'm sorry. And I got sea sick going down the Columbia River. I'd been on those small boats and it didn't bother me a bit but that slow roll of the ship going down the Columbia river... I got so sick I lost my dog tags down the commode where I was throwing up.

DILLEN: Mmm.

FLEMING: And I never did tell anybody so at the end of the war I had to wait to get out 'till they made me some more dog tags. So I went all through the war without any dog tags. But that's just another little story...

DILLEN: Hmm.

FLEMING: ...of - of a fear of being laughed at or something. So you, you did things like that. Uh, I didn't find my service challenging, I found - I found I loved the practicing of our boats, I loved the time we had on the ship we worked on our boats. While everybody else was scraping paint and painting, we'd work on our hind landing craft. And we had a little thing we had a tarp over the landing craft so that rain wouldn't get in it. And so I slung a hammock up in my landing craft and when they started chipping paint I had to go work on my boat and lay in my landing craft and read books. [chuckles]

DILLEN: [chuckles]

FLEMING: But, you know, that's life for you. Uh, I felt that the United States, even in - in the con - time of the Depression and the Dust Bowl and all, the people still cared for each other. And I think that's still going on in America. But, I just, uh, can't understand some of the changes that's coming into America today. We've lost a lot of our freedoms.

DILLEN: Hmm.

FLEMING: And we've lost the work ethic that we had back in those days. Everybody worked. And I know one of my sisters thought that I went into the Navy so they wouldn't have another mouth to feed. She didn't realize I was working and helping feed 'em. [laughs]

DILLEN: [laughs]

FLEMING: And then when I went into the Navy I sent most of my money home and, sadly to say, I winded up playing poker and I didn't have to worry about money. And, uh, that's sort of life on the ship, it was boring. And I read every book on the ship. So, when I got out to go to college, they didn't even ask me if I'd went to high school, which I hadn't. And I had three years of college and two year - a year and a half at William Mary and then, uh, then three - and then two years in Bible college.

DILLEN: Hmm.

FLEMING: But - go ahead.

DILLEN: Oh, I was just responding.

CATHERINE FLEMING: [inaudible]

FLEMING: Well, I guess I'll get back on the questions. Uh, ... I've answered them down to eleven, I know.

DILLEN: Mhmm.

FLEMING: When I - When I got to Astoria and we deployed, we went down to Seattle and loaded troops. And, uh, I left the United States with the band playing "Sentimental Journey." [laughs] What a song to sing when you're going off to where you might get killed.

DILLEN: Mhmm.

FLEMING: But I remember it. [chuckle] And my memory is pretty bad at 92.

DILLEN: [chuckle]

FLEMING: But, uh, I served then in the amphibious forces. And, uh, obviously I've got a little outline here. Uh, I made my som - I was interviewed here a while back for a high school boy getting extra points for interviewing a WWII veteran. And he asks me, he says, "Well, did you have a lucky charm when you were in?" And I said, "No, I had a praying mother."

DILLEN: Mmm.

FLEMING: He said, "You didn't even have a rabbit's foot?" And I said, "No, I killed too many rabbits to think they were lucky."

DILLEN: [laughs]

FLEMING: And this was the kind of life that I lived. I - I got up in the morning and mother said, "You want biscuits and gravy and fried rabbit?" And I'd say, "Yeah." And she'd say, "Well, go out and kill me a rabbit." Well, fifteen, twenty minutes, I was back in there with a rabbit skinned and ready to go in the skillet. And that's the way we lived in a little ranch community. Not

many young men today could say that they'd worked in brandings, and cattle round-ups, and rode horses and all that kind of stuff. Our little town... Cathy's telling me I have to get back to the book.

CATHERINE FLEMING: [inaudible]

DILLEN: It's okay.

FLEMING: [inaudible]

CATHERINE FLEMING: [laughs]

FLEMING: [chuckles] Uh, well I'll start off then. Uh, we went to a - to Honolulu at first with our troops, and then we went to, um, Maui, the island of Maui, to train for the invasion of Iwo Jima. 'Course we didn't know we were training there. And, uh, then from there we - we had a big beach party, Christmas beach party, at, uh, Maui. And, uh, I got to [unclear] with the chaplain and all the guys, at fifteen years old. Sixteen then. Uh, then we were given a map with, um, [unclear] we were given a map of an island. It - we didn't know what island it was but it looked like a pork chop...

DILLEN: Hmm.

FLEMING: ...with a small hill that fit the little end. And we later learned that that hill was Mount Suribachi. Then from in - Iwo to Saipan and February the 11th, '45 and then from Saipan to Iwo Jima on February the 19th. At six o'clock in the morning, we got our boats ready. My boat was the top boat on - on - there was four boats stacked on the quarter-deck, there was 24 landing craft on our ship. It was, uh, 22 LCVPs, which was Higgins boats, and there were two, uh, LCMs, which was a steel boat that would haul a tank or anything like that, plus troops. My job was just to haul wounded. And we got our boats in the water, mine was one of the first in the water, and, uh, then we began to circle around outside. And then we - I went in with a wave, I think it was the third or fourth wave, cause we had all [unclear] soldiers and about that time they were met with a mortar barrage. And, uh, I don't know whether it was that trip or the one, next one, but I went in eight day - eight times that day hauling wounded off the beach. And the first or the second trip, they blew up boats on my right and skipped me and blew up boats on my left and I never got a scratch.

DILLEN: Wow.

CATHERINE FLEMING: [inaudible]

FLEMING: We had...

CATHERINE FLEMING: [inaudible]

FLEMING: ...the beach was just a long volcanic black ash for about 30 or 40 feet and it had a little berm that was about five feet high that was no place for the boys to dig in those foxholes or

anything. And the beach was packed. And they opened up with a mortar barrage and artillery barrage and they killed about everybody. The whole - when I went in the whole beach was loaded with wounded.

DILLEN: Mmm.

FLEMING: And we just carried as many off as we could in the boat. I had a - I had a - the boat group officer, which was over all the boat groups, rode in my boat, which was a hospital boat. And all we did - we had a corpsman too, we picked the young men off the beach and the time we got 'em off the beach to - to back to the - it was a LST with a barge, just off the beach a little ways, out of mortar range. And we - the time I picked up the wounded then I had 'em at triage within 20 minutes. And then if I had to go to the hospital ship, it was another 30 minutes outside. But then we took wounded to all the ships because all of 'em had sick bays. Um, when we left my boat had 260 wounded on it.

DILLEN: Mmm.

FLEMING: And the third day we were there, uh, they all went out at night and of course they had no lights on in convoy. And another ship came across and hit my ship and - and rammed it and, where my gun tub was if I was on board, and tore it off and tore a 20-foot hole in our side of our ship and everybody thought the ship was gonna sink. And, uh, the chaplain and two, uh, coxswain mates, uh, went down and closed all the watertight hatches so the ship didn't sink. But we had to abandon ship orders but we had the lifeboats because all of us was between them and the beach. We couldn't go to the beach at night 'cause the marines would shoot us and we couldn't go back to the ship 'cause they would shoot us. So, if we didn't get back before dark we just had to roll around. All of our boats were out and so they - the crew gave the wounded men their lifejackets. And, uh, praise God they didn't sink. Six men were lost but we found them the next day floating in the ocean, they weren't dead.

DILLEN: Mmm.

FLEMING: And, uh, that's how it went, those first days. The ship pulled in then real close to the beach so we could unload; even if we sunk we'd still be above water to unload our ship. [cough] 'Course that put us in artillery range. And, uh, so, our ship was hit two or three times by artillery but, um, nobody was hurt by it. And [cough] one time, I don't know, it's the second day I guess, I went into the - no, it was past that, must've been the fourth day - I went in, picked up a load of wounded. I went in on a big wave so I could get way up on the beach so the guys didn't have to wade in a lot of water to get on my boat to bring the stretchers on. And I went over a sunk boat that I didn't know about, and when I backed up, the ramp cable of that sunk boat wrapped around my screw [unclear] and killed my engine and I got it started and killed it again and about the third time my boat group officer, Ensign Strand, says, "Let's abandon boat." Well, there's a mortar barrage going on about then. I told him he could get off if he wanted to but I wasn't leaving that boat.

DILLEN: Mmm.



FLEMING: 'Bout that time a big wave come in and I got over it. And, uh, then, got back to the ship with my wounded and - and, uh, then they hauled me aboard to repair my shaft and my screw, which took them about two hours. I got a hot meal, and we was back at it again.

DILLEN: Mmm.

FLEMING: And, I wanna tell ya, as such, we hauled in the Fourth and the Fifth Marines, and I have such a - a feeling of honor of those marines.

DILLEN: Mmm.

FLEMING: Not one of them complained, not one of those young men. One - one officer I talked to was shot at and he'd been - a mortar hit by him and blowed his clothes practically off of him and that ol' volcano ash into his body. And he said he was hit three times with bullets, and I was - he asked me if I had a cigarette. And I said, "No, I don't have a cigarette, but I'll get you one."

DILLEN: Mmm.

FLEMING: And I got one for him and I asked him, says, "Have you got any stomach wounds?" He said, "No." And he said - I said, "Would you like to have a shot of brandy?" And he said, "Yes." 'Cause a corpsman had given cases of two shot brandies that we could give to the wounded if they didn't have a stomach wound. And, uh, so it made us pretty, uh, nice to the wounded people, they thought. But these men, so brave, going up there in our boat group, our beach party, that went in with the first wave.

DILLEN: Right.

FLEMING: We lost seven - seven men in our beach party. Then we lost three men and one of our LCMs, a mortar dropped in the [unclear] and it had killed three of our sailors...

DILLEN: Mmm

FLEMING: ...and all the wounded that was on that boat. And, uh...

DILLEN: Um, were you ever wounded in action?

FLEMING: No, I was not even got a scratch. I got - I was going up holding a cable one time and got a little bit of scrape on the back of my hand that bled. [chuckle] But that wasn't a wound. [laughs]

DILLEN: [chuckle]

FLEMING: And, uh, I know that the prayers of my family and the prayers at home must've saved me because they killed people all around me, and, I wasn't hurt.

DILLEN: Mhmm.

CATHERINE FLEMING: You saw the flag go up.

FLEMING: I saw the flag go up. Just before we left. 'Course we pulled out the fifth or sixth day, I can't remember for sure.

CATHERINE FLEMING: It was the day after the flag.

FLEMING: Day after the flag went up, we pulled out and we had a destroyer for an escort. I take that back, it was an LCM, which is a landing craft for an escort. And Tokyo Rose came on and says, "We know that *Napa* is leaving and - and we're gonna send us a U-boat out there to sink you. You're never gonna get home." And, uh, 'course Tokyo Rose come all the time telling us about the young men that was dating our girlfriends while we were gone and all this kinda stuff. But we didn't believe any of it so it didn't matter. But - but while we were leaving, we've just been out a day or so, an aircraft carrier passed us, I don't know which one it was, but it was on fire in one spot, but they were still taking planes off. And, uh, they were fighting the fire.

DILLEN: Mmm.

FLEMING: And they had probably been hit by a suicide plane, I don't know. I wish today that I knew which carrier it was but I don't. Um, we got back to Guam where we had a patch put on our - on our boat so we could get to Pearl Harbor. I thought we gonna go to the states and get repaired but we went to Pearl Harbor, got repairs, immediately load up with troops, and was going back it to Okinawa. Iwo Jima was only 600 miles from the main part of Japan. The hole in our side was twenty-foot wide, extended from the superstructure down to the bu - bilge. It ripped nev - our port side with another track from - that was at 4:45 in the morning. If it had hit just a little bit farther forward it would've hit the sickbay with those 260 wounded in. And if it had hit back it'd hit the crewmen that was off duty and sleeping. It hit the electrical shop, the medical supply, and their - our refrigerator. And, uh, we had food running outside of our boat all the way to Guam. One thing about it though, me and two other guys got up and went fishing off the side of the boat and caught enough fish for the whole ship to eat the next day.

DILLEN: Wow.

FLEMING: Well, I'm getting things all mixed up. But, uh, we - we just kept going and on it. And, uh, afterwards, we went - went back on September the eighth, all ships and convoy turned on their - all the lights after we hit - hit Okinawa. At Okinawa, uh, I wasn't under fire except a sniper every once in a while. [cough] And he was a bad shot or I'd be dead.

DILLEN: Hmm.

FLEMING: But we unloaded ammunition and everything 'cause went - the Japanese didn't defend the beach at Okinawa, they went inland. And, uh, we thought we had a ride but they had a terrible - Okinawa was almost - they lost more men in Okinawa than they did in Iwo Jima.

DILLEN: Right.

FLEMING: But we lost 30,000 men the first eight hours of Iwo Jima and uh... Cathy's telling me, "No," but I...

CATHERINE FLEMING: Yeah, that's... you're - you're getting mixed up. You didn't lose all those. There were 22 - 20 - 'bout 28 that were wounded or killed.

FLEMING: There was 28,000 wounded and killed.

CATHERINE FLEMING: Yeah, about 7,000 killed.

FLEMING: But, uh, there was a great number killed the first day; they just wiped up the beach. Then, October the 27th, I stood along with my boat crew and those who received purple hearts. Commander DuPont, that was a beach party commander, was on my right. My crew was on my left, and we received the following citation from the flagship commander of Amphibious Forces of the United States, Rear Admiral Hall, J. L. Hall. And this is how it reads: "For excellent service in the line of duty as a crew member of an [unclear] boat ni- from nineteen to twenty-second of February, in bringing the amphibious landing..." Excuse me, I gotta get over here a while. "... assault capture of Iwo Jima displayed a complete knowledge of his duties, untiring energy, deep devotion to duty, his most able assistance in the evacuation of wounded personnel of the beachheads during the initial assault days of the campaign. Consistently courageous and steadfast under the most intense mortar and artillery fire, he carried out his task with highly commendable - commendable fashion did contribute to the material success of the amphibious operation, whose conduct made evidence of a great value to the Naval service."

DILLEN: Wow.

FLEMING: And, uh, I felt very honored there. A lot of our beach party and our amphibious forces [unclear]. Now I got no scrapes at all but I made more landings in those first days than any other boat in that - in the whole convoy.

DILLEN: Wow.

FLEMING: And, uh, I'm sort of proud of that.

DILLEN: Of course.

FLEMING: And - go ahead.

DILLEN: I was just saying, of course, you're proud of that. That's impressive. It's very honorable.

FLEMING: I wish I could show you the pictures, there's so many of them. But from the war then comes to an end and we went from Manilla to Taiwan to French Indonesia to pick up Chinese troops at - but we waited 11 days before we begin to load them on the 13th. We were shocked to see children, eight and nine years in their - old in their army. The five ships we

loaded 'til we get not one more person on board the five ships since we had to leave the rearguard behind. We could hear the machine gun and rifle fire killing them off as we sailed away. It was hard to know that you left men to die, with no hope.

DILLEN: Wow.

FLEMING: That broke my heart. That broke my heart.

CATHERINE FLEMING: Tell them about the one that had the gun.

FLEMING: Then one - one of the - the young men didn't have any rifles, they just had a sack of rice around their - around their shoulders. Enough for about five or six days ration of rice. One of the officers on the - on the boat had a Mauser machine pistol, and somebody stole it from him. It came announcement over the ship that he had lost his gun and if he didn't find it, as soon as they landed on Okinaw - on, uh, or farthest Taiwan, which is farthest of them, that he would be shot if he didn't have his gun. So, whoever found it, would please turn it in there'd be no questions asked. Well, the gun was turned in. So the officer didn't get shot.

CATHERINE FLEMING: [inaudible]

FLEMING: But the young men - those young kids were trained to follow a man with a rifle and if he got killed they would pick up his rifle and take his place. Eight and nine years old.

DILLEN: Mmm.

FLEMING: And that - that just break your heart to see the picture of those young men I have somewhere in my book.

DILLEN: Right.

FLEMING: And we - we also went to, uh, to China to pick up Japanese troops before we picked up these. I'm getting out of order. Where we picked up at that same - same town in China we picked up about 1,500 Japanese prisoners, which we took back to Guam. And they were so glad to be captured and on our boat. And we fed 'em rice and ice cream and - and they'd mix all the ice cream, meat, and everything up together to eat. Uh, this - guarding were Marines. And I'll tell you the Marines weren't very happy with 'em. But the Marines, I guess it taught them to sing "You are my Sunshine," so they sang "You are my Sunshine" all the time. And we unloaded them then in Guam. Then we went to pick up the Chinese troops. Then, when everybody else was getting out, uh, we - the, uh - we had to take everybody home. So, uh, those days went on and, uh, just... Let me read you a thing that came out in the *Seattle Times* when we come home with our first cargo of wounded.

DILLEN: Okay.

FLEMING: "Quick action of the crew of the Attack transport *Napa* APA-157, avoid what would have been certain death for as many as 190 men aboard her when she - when *Napa* was rammed

in Iwo Jima on D-Day + 2. Officers and men of the ship set sail today. A gaping hole twenty-foot wide extended from the superstructure to the bilge was ripped in *Napa's* port-side. She was struck by another transport, which both were maneuvering under complete blackout at 4:45 o'clock on February the 21st. Five Seattle men, one Renton man was serving on the *Napa* at the time of the collision. She keeled over sharply on the impact, number 2 hull was splitted in 35 minutes and she was in the mi - in - in danger of sinking. The wounded, most were stretcher cases going topside the bicks - sickbay and given life jackets as the boat - ship's boat had been used to land assault trips who had no alternative but lower the wounded into the water in order to abandon ship had been necessary. In instance, the corpsman surrendered their life jackets to the wounded. We landed most of the troops, picked up casualties from the first assault wave, and then Lieutenant Robert - Commander Robert Lynch, 28 years old, Birtree, California, *Napa's* executive's office said it was touch and go for a while. The ship - we thought the ship was going down first, but everybody aboard did - did their job well and efficiently. We got back to the drydock area utter amazed to see what damage had been done."

DILLEN: Hmm.

FLEMING: And, um, so it goes on like that. And, uh, I just felt a great honor to serve the few days that I - and I had - we had one trip, it was really interesting. We, uh, was bringing a - 240 nurses back to the states and we had 140 crew. But it didn't matter, I didn't know what to do with a nurse anyway. But, uh, it was - it was a nice time to see - to get to see them sunbathing on the deck as we worked scraping paint - scraping the boat and painting the boat. [laughs]

DILLEN: [chuckle]

FLEMING: We got back. We got back,- the last trip we went back, brought another group back. We went up to the Aleutian Islands and we was racing another ship to get to San Diego first, where we unloaded most of our crew. We won the race and then we had another race to see who got through the Panama Canal first. We went through that - those - those islands in a fog at full speed. Our captain was not gonna lose the race. And we did get to the docks with no problem. And the docks was wonderful to see, but I was working down in the engine room 'cause we were on a skeleton crew. It was 'bout 120 degrees above board and I don't know what it was in the engine room. But I wanna tell you, we ate salt tablets like candy and drank water constantly 'cause we were sweating constantly. Well, I did go - get to go up and see how we were coming on my off-duty time. And then we went to Seattle. I went to - back to Norfolk, Virginia, where we unloaded all of our guns and everything. And then we went up to Baltimore. Oh, by the way, I met my wife while I was in Norfolk. Then we went up to Baltimore to, uh, to, um, decommission the ship. And while we were there, there was a bus and rail strike and - and, uh, we was given 72-hour leave, but we couldn't go but 20 miles from the ship. Well, I got - got my uniform but I got out and hitchhiked back to Norfolk, Virginia to see my first wife, May, and, uh, she was waiting for me. And we got some civilian clothes and we had a wonderful time. And time to go back - we decided I was gonna get out there and - and we were gonna get married. And time to go back, I had some civilian - we had some civilian clothes while I was there. And so I was in the station, um, at Baltimore changing from my civies into my uniform and the SPs came in. I thought, "Oh, Lord, here I'm gonna get a court-martial for being off the ship." They watched while I put my uniform on and smiled and went away. And I

went back to Norfolk to get discharged. I didn't have my dog tags. So, it took another 72-hours for them to make some dog tags. And I wasn't allowed to leave the base, so I went and cut a hole in the fence, crawled through the fence, and went to see May. And then I went back and they fixed my hole and I didn't have anything to cut again. So, I went way down where there wasn't many lights and crawled over the fence. But I didn't know that I was crawling over into the WAVES barracks area and they had guard dogs.

DILLEN: Whoa.

FLEMING: And the guard dogs came after me but I got away and got back to my barracks in time to not get court-martialed, and got discharged the next day.

DILLEN: Wow.

FLEMING: Then - then, you talk about - how 'bout what I did about work. Well, my - May knew the man that run the bus company and he got me a job driving a city bus, and I drove that bus for a long time. And, uh, you know, one of the questions you asked was about how the race relationships related there in the time.

DILLEN: Right.

FLEMING: Well, can I answer that now?

DILLEN: Sure.

FLEMING: I had on my 20mm cannon - I was a loader for a Black gunner. He was the best gunner we had on the ship. But when we got into battle area, they put him in as a mess cook and put me, a white guy, up there that couldn't hit the side of a barn. And then when I went to Norfolk to be on - to drive the bus, my first line was in an all-Black line. There was segregation there and, and, in the white area where you - where the Negroes had to go to the back. Or, the Blacks, however you want to call them. I had no feeling - I'd been raised with a race prejudice but I lost my race prejudice there. Those Black grandmas just saved me from getting killed, I think, while I was driving that bus. And, uh, we had a Black maid, she was just a wonderful lady. And I told her I was gonna take her back to New Mexico with me and she was, "Oh, Mister Fleming, I don't want go back to New Mexico with you." I'd told her that they had to walk on the streets and if they got on the sidewalk they'd be shot. Well, I was kidding and I told her different later. But...

CATHERINE FLEMING: 18 years old.

FLEMING: I was 18 years old then. And, uh, I, uh, stayed there in Norfolk and then I went to South Carolina and worked for my brother-in-law at a - a station for a few years. But, my hometown of Portales had signs on each side of it when I left, says, "N\*\*\*\*r, don't let the sun go down on you." So, I'd been raised up sorta race prejudiced, I'll tell you that.

DILLEN: Right.

FLEMING: But I lost it during the war. And I didn't go home for three years. And during that time we'd adopted a little girl. And, uh... the hardest thing in my life was taking that crying baby out of her mother - that crying mother out her - baby out of that crying mother's arms. But, praise God, my daughter now is on social security and she's contacted her half-brothers and sisters and just had a great time. But I'm sorry that her mother had passed away before she made this contact. I think America has lost a lot during these years. But I think I've been blessed beyond belief. I just - I'm 92 years old and I've had heart trouble and all that but I'm still up and going and...

DILLEN: Mhmm.

FLEMING: And, uh, I had my uniform down in Iwo Jima Museum in Harlingen and a book, little book, I wrote on - on, uh, on Iwo Jima, and another one I wrote about after Iwo Jima. But I told you about all I think about that. If you have any questions, please ask.

DILLEN: Sure. Um, so how do you think that your service influenced or affected your family at home?

FLEMING: My service - I had four sisters younger than me and a brother younger than them, and they all idolized me. Uh, as we were raised up, uh, I worked all the time, I mean, I mowed yards and everything else. And I would take 'em to the show on Saturday and buy 'em popcorn and, and I'd let 'em go get my jelly beans, which I counted and I knew exactly how many there was. And when they got, all they could have was the licorice.

DILLEN: [chuckle]

FLEMING: 'Cause I didn't like licorice. They learned to like licorice. [laughs]

DILLEN: [laughs]

CATHERINE FLEMING: [inaudible]

FLEMING: But after the war, I didn't talk about it to my family. My family were all proud of me. But I just didn't talk about the war. Fact, uh, the years my wife - the 58 years we were married I never talked about it. And, then, after I'd been married a while to Cathy, I received a call that asked me to come to New Mexico. 'Cause New Mexico - that the Iwo Jima survivors were going to be in a parade. And I didn't have - vet said, "Could you get in uniform?" I said, "I couldn't even get my leg in my uniform." [chuckle]

DILLEN: [chuckle]

FLEMING: But I made me a cap. I hated caps but I made me a cap that had "Iwo Jima Survivor" on it, "WWII," and I wore that. I got there and the Marines were putting on the parade. And I had - there was four [unclear] sailing and three Marines was the only survivors left that went in from Clovis, or that area, you know. And we had a parade about three miles

long. People packed on both sides cheering and, uh, a service band leading us, and boy - boy scouts leading us with flags. And, you know, I really felt - felt special.

DILLEN: Mhmm.

FLEMING: The young man next to me said, uh, "What way did you go? What beach did you hit?" And I said, "Beach Red, Red Beach." And he said, "Well, I went on Red Beach." And I said, "You did?" He said, "Yeah." I said, "I was a Corpsman." He says, "I stepped off the ship and picked up the - the LCVP - picked up a stretcher and a mortar hit and that's the last I remember till I woke up at Guam." Guess who picked him up? I picked him up off that beach. I dragged him to my ship and I took him to Guam.

DILLEN: Wow.

FLEMING: And here we were all these years later. In a - in a convertible, in a parade, sitting side to side.

DILLEN: Wow.

FLEMING: And, uh, the three others are dead now. Of those, I'm the only one left. And, you know, the WWII veterans are getting pretty scarce now. But I t- on my 90th birthday, it was a great birthday, and, uh, - but I told everybody that I'm not gonna have another birthday party till I'm 100.

DILLEN: [laughs]

FLEMING: So, you can just stand with me on that - that goal. And I think that closes up what I want to say.

CATHERINE FLEMING: On the 75th anniversary...

FLEMING: On my 75th anniversary...

CATHERINE FLEMING: ...of D-Day.

FLEMING: ...of D-Day, I was in - I was honored in...

CATHERINE FLEMING: Harlingen.

FLEMING: ...Harlingen by a parade and I was honored to get up and lay a wreath on the monument. Which, by the way, is, if you don't know, Harlingen is the first monument of Iwo Jima. And the one in Washington D.C. was copied from that one. If you haven't seen it, you ought to go see it.

DILLEN: Mhmm.



FLEMING: God bless, and I hope that everybody that listens to this enjoys it.

DILLEN: Thank you for taking the time to talk to me today.

FLEMING: Well, I've enjoyed it. And I've skipped from here to there but that's the way my memory is now.

DILLEN: Mhmm.

FLEMING: You'll just have to forgive me for that.

DILLEN: [chuckle] That's all right.

CATHERINE FLEMING: You wrote a book.

FLEMING: But I did write a book about it, I told you about that.

DILLEN: What was the name of the book?

FLEMING: Oh, they have it in the museum, I'll get you them. Uh, *The Last Days of WWII. Log of the USS Napa APA-157: Invasion of Okinawa - Iwo Jima.*

CATHERINE FLEMING: [inaudible]

FLEMING: I'd be glad to send you one. If you give May the ad - Cathy the address.

DILLEN: Oh, sure.

FLEMING: Oh, I'll be sending you those. I'll send it with those, uh, papers I have to send you back.

DILLEN: Okay, great. Yeah, that'd be great.

FLEMING: I'll send you one. And, uh, I hope you'll enjoy it. I give it to the museum there so they sell it in their - their museum at Harlingen to help pay for the new museum they're gonna build.

DILLEN: Mmm.

FLEMING: And, uh, I was honored to do it. I - for a long time, I, uh, I printed it for them, but they asked me if they had to - if they could print it and so. I never did charge 'em for it, I've never charged anybody for any of my books, and I've written about 20 booklets. But they're all on Christian stuff, not these.

DILLEN: Mhmm.

FLEMING: God bless you and thank you for your time.

DILLEN: You too, thank you so much.